Interview with Don Brown, afc2016037_04020
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Interviewed at Don Brown Funeral Home in Ayden, North Carolina, by Sarah Bryan for Folklore of the Funeral Services Profession

SB: Let me ask you to introduce yourself, please, for the recording.

DB: Good morning. My name is Don Brown. I'm Don Brown with Don Brown's Funeral Home in Ayden, North Carolina. 497 Second Street, 28513. My telephone number is [redacted]. I am a licensed funeral director for the state of North Carolina. I've been licensed twenty-three years. I attended the Fayetteville Tech Community College in 1992, and graduated in '94. I received my funeral service degree. I have also participated in different organizations in reference to the funeral industry. I have also served as the state president of the state Funeral Directors and Morticians Association of North Carolina. I am currently appointed to be starting on the Board of Funeral Service, which is located in Raleigh, North Carolina. I have been the district governor for North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. I also am a member of Epsilon Nu Mortuary Fraternity, where I serve as the coordinator for the national office, and also I serve as state president for the local chapter.

SB: I was reading on the website a bit about the history of this business. I wonder if you could talk a bit about how you got into the field.

DB: When I was seven years old, my grandfather passed. And we stayed seven houses behind Norcott and Company Funeral Home, which was the African American funeral home here in the Ayden community. My grandfather was having a visitation at Norcott and Company Funeral Home Memorial Chapel, which was located on Third Street here in Ayden. At the age of seven, when my grandfather passed, Mr. Norcott had my grandmother and my father and his sisters, his siblings, and they was all gathering around their mom, who was in a wheelchair—which was my grandmother. Mr. Norcott made a statement to my family; he said to let her grieve for her husband, because that's all she can do for him at this time, on this side. And I said that I wanted to be like him. So every morning I attended the Ayden Middle School, which was located on the corner of Sixth and Lee Street, at that time, which is now Doctor—well, it's still Lee Street. I would walk from my house to the school, and every morning he would be outside, he called it policing his yard from last night activities. So one morning I started picking up his trash, and putting it in the trashcan. He gave me a dollar. And I thought I was the richest kid in the world. From that time I started to coming by the funeral home, started cutting grass—they let me cut grass—and then as I got a little older they let me come in the funeral home a little more, and they was teaching me how to put up tents and dig graves. And I did all that for a while, and then I was able to start going on funerals, making removals. And then as I got older, I went to Fayetteville Tech Community College, got my degree, came back home; I joined the Eastern District Funeral Directors' and Morticians' Association, which is, we have five districts in the state of North Carolina. We have the Eastern District, the Western, the Piedmont, the Central, and the—Fayetteville is called—hmm. I got to get that district together, but I'll let you know. We do have five districts in the state of North Carolina. We have two associations: we have the Funeral Directors Association, and then we have the Funeral Directors and Morticians Association, in

North Carolina. And we all are regulated by the North Carolina Board of Funeral Service. And as I came along, I have been able to serve in different capacities of the funeral service. I opened my business in June of 1999.

[00:05:00] It was June the 1st. And in six months, we did thirty-eight funerals. In 2000, we did a hundred and thirty-eight funerals in one year. And we average right at a hundred thirty-eight, hundred forty, a year. We have been very successful based on you have to stay humble, you have to do the right thing; sometimes you can't agree and sometime you have to disagree. And every action do not require a reaction to every conversation that is made. And you have to stay humble. Through all that we have been successful for seventeen years. In our seventeen years we have finally—October the 31st, we opened a 5,000-plot cemetery in the county which is located at 1647 Ivory Road in Winterville, North Carolina. We had our first burial out there on November the 11th, and then we just had another burial out there on Friday. Also, we own a florist. We got our own florist on-site, and we help families with caterings. We do programs in-house, so that takes all the—when you come here it's just like one shop, one-stop shop. You can get everything pretty much that you want through our team. We have a team of professionals, including that got me started with Mr. Charles Edwards, which he is no longer with us. He's went with another firm. Also we still have involved with us Miss Lena Tucker Gooding. She handles funerals and pre-needs. Mr. Terence Farmville. He helps us on funeral. Mr. Johnny Dove. He owns Farmville and Dove Mortuary, but we always work together. And Mr. Ernest Perkins own Perkins Funeral Home. We're pretty much close in the area, working together. And when I'm in need of other vehicles for extra funerals, we contact him and Willoughby Mortuary, Mr. J. T. Willoughby. And Horns—Koran's Funeral Home, which is located in Wilson. Willoughby is in Tarboro. So we all just kind of bind together. Sometime, you know, you need other help to help you get through different organization. I also have the opportunity to serve on the Pitt Community Foundation board, which deal with the scholarship. I'm also, I serve with the Salvation Army. I am currently the chairman for the Ayden Chamber of Commerce. This is my second term. I have been on the board of recreation here in the community, on other projects, of doing things. And it's just like I said, the thing about anything, you have to have, you have to treat people the way you want to be treated. And I have a very dependable staff. We have been together almost 17 years without hiring or firing anyone. And we have picked up a couple new people because of people have sort of wanted to retire—you know, elderly, and you want to respect them—but they're still part of the family. And that will never change. Like I said, I'm just grateful. I have done several articles. I was featured in the Funeral Directors Worldwide magazine, on doing an article. And the key to success is proper planning and accountability produces favorable results. If you plan something, you're going to go through challenge. And the thing about challenge, every person that be in business going to get challenged. Sometime you'll get sued, but it's part of doing business. If you ain't never had a dogfight, you just keep right on living a little longer in business. You'll see. Sometime you want to give it up. It's just the mentality of how life is. And see, our business is such a emotional, stressful business, that it's built on emotion, and everybody in a family may not get along with one another at the same time, and it cause a chaos. And when they walk through the door, you in the middle of the wasps' nest. Don't know how you got there, but you can't side with no one. You have to be straight down the middle, whether it's family, friends, it doesn't matter. You just cannot be on the side with no one. And once you've established that leadership you'll be successful.

[00:10:03] Some people will call you again, some won't. You know, some people say, "Well, she ain't in charge," "He ain't in charge." But once you establish the foundation with who is in charge, you have to let them know. Everybody else has to come through them. Because if you try to accommodate all ten people at that table, you're going to have a wasps' nest. And I just think that not having a wasps' nest is a successful inning. I'd like to also say that I am grateful to be part of this interview today. It means a lot that growth and—it helps you, and you learn to, when you look back at what you've done, you'll be able to encourage the next young person to be able to do better than what you did. Now, in our area here, we've got several African American funeral homes. In Ayden you have Tranquility and Don Brown. Also you have in Ayden Farmer Funeral Home. This is a white firm, but we all get along so well. In Greenville you have two white firm, which is Smith Funeral Home and Wilkerson Funeral Home. The African American firm would include Flanagan, Phillip Brothers and Anderson, Blake Phillip Funeral Service, New Generation, (Carlington?) Funeral Service. Also in the Pitt County area you have Perkins Funeral Home. In the Fountain area you have Hemming Willoughby, in Fountain. So there's seven or eight funeral homes, African American, that serves the community. We probably have maybe about 80, 90, to 100,000 people in the Pitt County area. Pitt County is currently growing. We're putting in a new bypass, because if you're driving into the Greenville area at any time in the mornings or in the middle of the day, you will think there are more cars than it is highway. And so that's a good idea, when a person planning for a future project, to think about the growth of your community. We used to be able to say Ayden was here, Winterville, and Greenville, but now everything is such compact, so close together, that you think everything is in-house into one. Because you step into one town, before you know it, a city limit to another, and then you go five more feet, you're in another city limit. So that's just part of how life is here.

SB: You've said a number of things that I'd like to go back to—

DB: Yes ma'am.

SB: —because actually, they touch on questions I had.

DB: Okay.

SB: But the first thing that struck me was—was it Mr. Norcott?

DB: Norcott and Company. Mr. Norcott, if you look up here [pointing to one of many frames on the wall] it says "My first family." That's me, I was 13 years old in that picture.

SB: And you said that you wanted to be like him. Can you tell me what those qualities were that you saw in him?

DB: Those qualities was, as you see in his picture, he's dressed in, he has the white tuck-coat in. I think he was having a birthday party or something, and we was going out on a funeral. Those quality was dignity, equity, and respect of your fellow man. And trustworthy. Those are the quality that I saw into him when I was a young man. Now, I had no idea; I worked for his funeral home from seven years old until 1999. His nieces and nephew came in and took over the business. A 50-year-old business now is out of business. So you can't leave your business to

your family because they're your family. I'd rather leave my business to my staff, have them set it up through a trust, if my kids, not feasible to do it, and let the staff run it and they just pay the trust so much for the business. Because without someone— It's two types of leader: one want for money, and one for heart. And the one for money is going to dissolve. The one for heart will continue touching. The valves will still be moving.

SB: How do you deal with the—you mentioned how emotional the work is—how do you deal with the stress of, you know, working with so many grieving people, and seeing so much pain in those families?

DB: Well—and this is going to kind of touch you a little bit—my mom been in the hospice 17 years right now. And that's how I deal with it. I look at every family, if that was my mama. I hire my staff based on, can you work with a family if that was your child, your mama, your brother, your sister? And that's the way we deal with it. Because we look at every family if it was our own family. Now, if you don't have that compassion of love, you're in it for the money.

SB: That goes back to the empathy that you mentioned.

DB: Yes ma'am.

SB: And the heart. I was interested also that you had worked in the field for so long before you—when you were so young, before you went to college.

DB: I never worked another job.

SB: Wow.

DB: This is all I know, and that's why I make the best of it.

SB: What do you think are the advantages of, you know, learning by doing, before getting your professional certification?

DB: I think the advantage was, with me, was I was born five houses from the funeral home.

[00:15:00] Been in this community all my life. As a young man I didn't have a bad record. Because people hold your record against you, good or bad. And if I had a bad record, I wouldn't be as successful as I was today. And that's been one of my advantage. I think, now my personal opinion is, I will not sit down with a person doing an apprenticeship until they've gone to school. I've wasted time with two people, and they've never been to school. So now my difference was, my heart was connected into what I was doing. Now, when I graduated in '95, they presented me with the scholarship and a plaque, as you see right there on that picture. And then in '98 'til, I don't know, they appointed me the—wait a minute—the recording—I was corresponding secretary for the district. And then I've been the president of the district also. So all of that was, like I say—that '95, when they presented me that plaque, that's when, that's the same sort of picture. Now, back here on the wall here, that's Mr. Norcott when he was—that's way back, in

the ‘60s, early ‘70s. And I still keep that picture. See, every time when I think I’m doing wrong I look up either this way or that way. And it tells me, hey, just relax. Stay focused.

SB: Trust your instincts.

DB: Trust your instincts. Yes.

SB: I understand that historically the funeral directors have been important people in the African American business communities through the generations. Is that something you can talk a bit about, the sort of historical perspective?

DB: Yeah, well, okay, in the African American communities, it was, to me, three things that we had: we had the beauty shop, or the barber shop; we may had had someone that had a grocery store; and then the next thing was the funeral director. And the funeral director was seen as a lawyer, he was seen as a doctor—because back then, I remember when I was young, we used to take the ambulance, and take people to Durham, because they didn’t have the transporting services. We had to take them all the way, on the hearse, take them to Durham. Or wherever their doctor appointment was. So you know, we was like, in the medical field. Sometimes we have to—like I say, answer questions like a lawyer. We, we’re not lawyers, and we can’t give legal advice, but we can give you our opinion. And that’s the foundation of most of the—any business, really, but of the African American, the funeral home, that is basically the foundation that people know that you could trust your funeral director. Because the funeral director was part of most—Because most everybody that I’m funeralizing, I grew up with the kids. You know? And it’s more of a personal than it just is a thing of service. It’s compassion.

SB: So the funeral director would have connections and background and knowledge in all sorts of areas.

DB: All sorts, and knew everybody. Everybody knew the funeral director.

[00:20:00] People would come to town and call the funeral director, because he knows everybody. Like the postman. The police officer. If you want to know where somebody lives—if it’s not, you know, anything illegal—you can go to the police department, they can pretty much tell you. Most of your police officers know most of everybody in the community, whether you think so or not. They have an idea of who is who and what goes on. And the post office, they do your mail every day.

SB: If it’s all right for me to ask about this – and please tell me if you’d rather not—

DB: Sure. Go ahead.

SB: —address this, but I wonder if I can ask about how your spiritual beliefs influence your work.

DB: I am a, I’m considered a disciple. You know, disciples was in the Bible. My spiritual belief is the reason why I’m here. Regardless of your faith—I don’t care if you’re Jehovah

Witness or you're Baptist, whatever, your faith is your faith, whatever you believe in is your belief. And I had to learn when I first opened up, I put pews in, and they had crosses on it. Well, I had a family tell me, "Well, we're Jehovah's Witnesses, and we don't deal with the crosses." So I changed everything out to make everybody feel—I put chairs in—so I could touch everybody's spirit. Because like I said, everybody— Now, we just buried a Jamaican Friday, and they, a little different. But you have to deal with people on their belief. They don't call you because they have to, they call you because they trust you. And when they told me about what turned then on or turns then off—you know, Seventh-Day Adventists, they do services on—they don't have nothing on Saturday. They go to church. So I visit the Seventh-Day Adventists. I visit the Jehovah Witness. I visit everybody. And I bury everybody, because they see me as a person that accept them. You've got people that are homosexual; I bury a lot of them. I accept you for who you are. Those are choices that you have to make, and the religious part of what you deal with in your spirit is what you have to live with.

SB: Are there different funeral practices that you have to adapt to—

DB: Yes, ma'am.

SB: —both in terms of taking care of the person's remains and the funeral?

DB: Uh, the Muslims. Most of them don't embalm. They come in—we pick up the body—they come in, they wash the body, they wrap the body, and normally before sunset we have buried that body. We take Africans; we may keep them a month before we ship them out, because you have to go through the different customs, you have to have the passport right, all IDs, birth certificate. All that stuff has to be— And then, like the Hispanic, you have to see do they have a visa, are they here on a visa or were they born here, are they here legal or illegal? And then, like some of the Hispanic, like someone could have a green card and not a visa, but they could stay here—you know, they could get Social Security. Because I talk to some of them about buying life insurance; I try to sell insurance. I was talking to one this morning, and she was sharing with me that she could write insurance on her kids, but she couldn't get it, because she only have a green card. And she's trying to get passport, but she can't get passport. The kids can, because they were born here. Now, for example, say if somebody from, that is legal here, say if they married someone here, then they would be considered, then they can become a citizen. So all those things you're asking are things that I research. Also, I don't know if I've got the book here or not—

[0:24:00 – 0:25:20 Don Brown showing Sarah Bryan an article in a book about African American businesses in Eastern North Carolina.]

SB: And what you were saying about Latin American immigrants sounds like it comes back to the trust issue.

DB: The trust issue!

SB: Because if they don't—obviously they trust you, because they're telling you about their legal status.

DB: Yeah! So that's what I'm saying. So that lets you know, when I'm sitting down this morning, this lady telling me, she said, "You know, Mr. Don Brown, you said something to me one day I was upset, and you said to me, you said, 'Something wrong with you today.'" And she said, "I were upset." She said, "You're the only one that recognized that something was wrong with me. And I appreciate that." She said, "My own husband didn't recognize that." I said, "Well, I come in here every day"—I get a [redacted], I said, "I'm in here every day." And then we just talked, and she was telling me about her kids can get the card. Because she wanted to go back to Mexico, but she can't go. And I told her, "Well, don't give up. If they gave you a green card," and she said, well, the only other way she could get one is if, say, someone she's working for to say that she's legal. I said, "Well, that probably should happen." Because she works for someone. I said, "That probably will happen." I said, "You've been here a long time, so when you've been working with the same company, you might—" You know, we was talking about those things, and I enlightened her this morning on how she could talk to her boss. And she was going to do that today. I don't know what the record's going to be until I talk back with her. But that might— And then she could become legal. But her husband couldn't be, but she could.

SB: So again, that's having the legal understandings, and knowing about all these different aspects of—

DB: Of what goes on. I had a Jew. I picked a Jew up. They don't do embalming, and they like to be buried before sunset. Well, he died that night. I picked him up, shipped him out that morning at seven—picked him up about nine that night, made the arrangement, shipped him out about seven, he was buried by six that afternoon. In a Jewish cemetery in New York somewhere. So I'm just saying to say, is that, if you're going to make a cake, learn the new form, products and items that go in that cake, and the old forms that goes in that cake, so that you can put them together. Like Mr. Barber did with creating the Brown Hill Cemetery book. He researched this thing for about ten years, and he has done excellent on it. Like I said, I didn't have no idea that we was in the book. He called me, he said, "Listen I want to present you this book." I said, "How did you get all my information?" He said, "I been working on it." I said, "How did you chose me?" He said, "I could have chose someone else, but I like you." And then during that, we was able to secure his funeral arrangements, pre-need arrangements. So that's what I'm saying. You never know who you touch and who you don't.

SB: How have funerals changed over the course of your career?

DB: Um— I remember when I was young, if somebody died in the community, the neighbor over there may bring some collards, or somebody may bring a cake, or somebody over there may bring something. Then at the church, I remember my grandfather and them, whether white or black, they would be up under the tree. They would cut up lemonade or make tea, and serve it to everybody coming through the line. Flies blowing. Well, now there's no traditional no more. There's no more of that type of love. The next generation has really changed. People don't even do repass. I had five funerals last month, and we didn't even do— Funeral Saturday! They didn't feed nobody. Young minds are totally different. My daughter concept of running a funeral home is totally different than mine.

[00:30:00] Now, I don't know then years down the road what it'll be, but I'll tell you right now. My son's concept is totally different. He likes to be late. I like to be on time. And if you pick up on those concepts, can that person run your business? No.

SB: What do you think that's due to?

DB: Generation. Just generation. Generation habits. Like when you went to college, you met friends, your friends may not have been the same friends that you went to high school with. Can you tell the difference? You got kids?

SB: I don't, no.

DB: Okay. Are you the only sibling?

SB: I've got a younger, much younger brother.

DB: Okay. But still, his concept is very different. And you'll be looking at yourself, saying, "What's wrong with this kid?" Am I right? Okay. That's just life.

SB: Do you think that the earlier generations—

DB: Well, the earlier generation had such a harder time. The everything now is at the tip of your hand. What you're doing? It's so diversible that you can— We don't even value having traditional dinner anymore. Because when you have a dinner, 95% of the people are doing what? On your cellphone. When you're having dinner with Don Brown, everybody take their cellphone and lay it down right there. "We're going to have dinner." I don't care who's at the table, grown folks—they're looking at me—I said, "No, we are having dinner. Put your phone there. When we finish dinner, we can grab your phone." The technology have brainwashed us so much that we wouldn't even know how to go and pull a piece of paper that you need, because you think it's right there on that computer. It may not be there. Computer may shut down. What is your back up plan? I keep everything in a secure file cabinet. That make sense?

SB: Yeah, it does. Absolutely. How about—so the relationship between neighbors and friends changes—do those changes carry over within families as well?

DB: Yes.

SB: To how, you know, grandchildren might behave at a grandparent's death?

DB: Yes, it does. Funny you say that, because I had this little book about children. I have no idea where it is now, but I'll make sure you get a copy of it. One of my friend wrote this book about grieving, dealing with, the process of dealing with children. If you go to my website again—have you been to my website?

SB: I have.

DB: You look up grieving, and you saw all the stuff I got up there?

SB: Yeah, all the resources.

DB: Okay. That's—.

SB: Great. I'll take a look at that. I was interested that you mentioned that with Muslim families, did you say that they actually come in and do the washing?

DB: Yeah, they come in and do the washing, the wrapping, and they ask you to step out.

SB: Wow. How do you accommodate when a family is doing part of what you would otherwise be—.

DB: Well, I have families come in now, they do the hair, they do the makeup, they sometime wants to help us dress the body. But what I do do, I get them to sign a non—well, it's called a—if they get sick or something, that the funeral home won't be held reliable. Because if someone wants to go back there, "That's my mama, I want to see her." I'd say, "Now, I need you to sign this form that whatever happens, it happened to me because you choose to do it." You've got to protect yourself. I don't care, when they walk out of there if something go wrong, they going to sue you. The lawyer going to say—first thing the lawyer going to say, "Now, you're supposed to be a professional. You should not have allowed them to be in that position. And then the jury listening to them, they're going to have sympathy of the family being sick. Am I right or wrong? So you've got to study this stuff.

SB: Is that something that happens frequently with many funeral homes, to have the family participate?

DB: I don't know. I don't know. We do, we allow them to participate. I picked up a gentleman last night, I got the daughters to put him, help me put him on the stretcher. That gave them comfort.

SB: A friend of mine in Tennessee recently lost her brother, and they went to their, the funeral home their family had always worked with, and the next generation had just taken over the business. And they didn't want them to come and wash the body—because that was their family tradition too, you know, was that they prepared their loved one. And it caused a lot of hurt, because the funeral director wouldn't allow it.

[00:35:00] DB: See, there again, it depends on the funeral home and the relationship. So what you just said is an accurate point. Now, I do it; will my kids do it? Now, think about this. If they have death again, they won't call that funeral home no more. And that funeral home will be trying to figure out how did they lose that family. But the family need to be honest with them. Do you agree?

SB: Yes, sure.

DB: So maybe when you talk to your friend again, you need to encourage her to sit down with the funeral home, the next generation down, to explain to them what their tradition used to be, and how they felt, so that they won't lose business. I had a lady tell me how she felt about something. And that's how you learn. Because if you got people that are doing things—see, I do a survey, which I'm going to show you a copy of. I do surveys on every funeral, and I get the input on what they think and how things go.

SB: And that goes back to the quality that you first saw in Mr. Norcott, the equity and respect.

DB: Yes, ma'am.

SB: You're making other people's traditions part of what you do.

DB: That's right. And I ask the family, I ask the family, "Are there something that you'd like to see as part of this funeral?" I mean, we have motorcycle funerals—I ride motorcycles. I ride my bike in the procession. We had a funeral at the pond. I took a lady back home, put her in her bed. They had the visitation. So, you know. Because that's what they used to do, take everybody home. They did! So every now and then you get a older person that still has that traditional, you know. Most young people today, theory is, have a funeral and gone. They don't even value of what they put their parents in. They just have—(?) away. Gone. Probably won't even never come back to visit the grave.

SB: Somebody who grew up in Greenville [NC] told me that the Elks Lodge there used to have homegoing celebrations, and that were almost like what happens in New Orleans—you know, with people actually walking in front of the hearse to the graveyard. Do you know of anything like that that happens nowadays?

DB: I have not seen that in my time.

SB: This was definitely an earlier generation he was talking about. Yeah. I was also interested in what you said about funeral homes working together and cooperating.

DB: If you read my article out there, the second one I put in the paper, I put it out there, my article, that if all funeral homes that serve their family will work together, and the same dignity and respect, regardless of who family you're serving, will be maintained at all times, because people will see that you're together. Regardless of who they use, that's the important thing. And my theory is that if a family calls us—people don't call my service based on price, because if a family's shopping, we wouldn't get the calls. Because we're the highest African American funeral home in Pitt County. But they call us for our service. The same compassion you see in these pictures, in these plaques, that's called dedication. That's called working when you don't want to. That's called getting cursed out and not responding. That's part of how it goes.

SB: How do you stay resilient about things like that, those challenges?

DB: I just relax, take me a ride, do what I do and come back.

[00:40:00] Yeah. Yeah. See, I don't take my work home. When I leave, regardless of what happens, I don't go home and discuss it with my wife. My wife works at the hospital. I leave it home. I pick it up in the morning. You can't kill your vine at home because your frustration today.

SB: So, but you must sometimes get calls late at night.

DB: Oh yeah, of course. Of course. But I'm just saying, you asked me about the stress. I'm just saying, I don't take it home with me. I leave it here and pick it up.

SB: And what is it like for your family? What do they—

DB: Well, my wife is involved in the association. She's been involved since our son was—this is our son right here [showing photo]. He was maybe four or five years old.

SB: Oh, how sweet.

DB: I'm just saying.

SB: So he's involved too.

DB: They grew up in the business. So it's not like— My daughter, 16 years old, her and my nephew, they pick up bodies. Set up houses. Run death certificates. They're involved.

SB: I know I'm running up close to an hour—

DB: No, that's okay.

SB: —and I don't want to take up too much of your morning—

DB: That's okay.

SB: —but do you think that funeral directors, and other people in the field, have a different understanding, or different beliefs about death and life after death than—

DB: Well, everybody do, because your belief is what you believe. So that's not just funeral directors, that's people in general, thinking. Because some people don't believe in God. But that don't make you, like I said earlier, that don't make you, as a provider, change what you believe in because that person don't believe in it. But you still have to service them in a capacity. If you feel that they're overbearing to your service, don't serve them. Because you've got standards. And your standards got to be maintained at all times.

SB: This is fascinating, I really appreciate this.

DB: I'm going to present something to you. Wait a minute, here we go. This is what we gave every family that we served this year, for Christmas. I sent Christmas— And I had a custom CD

with all the Christmas songs. And that tells you about the memorial service that's coming up on the 19th. The 18th or the 19th. We do a memorial service every year, and this is the eighth one that we've put together. We do it in conjunction with Farmville and Dove Mortuary.[1]

SB: Wow. So for all the people who've passed in the previous year?

DB: Mm-hmm. We record it—we do live funerals, we livestream funerals. Everything's up there.

SB: That's a wonderful tradition. That must mean a lot to the community.

DB: Oh, yeah! I'm the only one doing that. And you see that custom CD? And you know it cost more than two dollars, right?

SB: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

DB: (Laughing) I invested a lot of money into that, and I had that card made. And it's nice.

SB: It's very nice. Thank you, I appreciate having a copy of this. Oh, and what about the use of technology? My impression is that you're way ahead of a lot of other places.

DB: Okay. My limousines have TVs in them. We have custom TVs. We livestream weddings, proms. We were releasing doves at funerals, but we lost, 25 doves died at one time. I don't know if they got a virus or what had happened. But that really tore me up. But technology is the key. I mean, I could be talking to you and texting somebody about picking up a body. Whatever the case may be. We had a couple calls last night, and one of the guys—you know, we work together, you know—I don't ask my staff to do nothing that I won't do. Sometimes if it's after a certain hours I'll go pick up the body, because they're with their family, and their family truly comes first, before my business. That's just my respect to them. And that shows dignity and good leadership.

SB: What do you think is the future? What's coming for the field?

DB: The future of funeral service is going to be really different, because the generation that's coming are not on a solid foundation. It's going to be real different. It's going to be a rush, rush, rush. Because the generation that's coming now, their compassion and dedication—to me, I'm only 50, and I've been in it since I was seven; I was 13 on that picture there, so that lets you know, I've been around a long time in this business, and I have never worked another job. And that's why I make the best of this. Yep. I never worked another job. And I went to college and I joined the fraternity. I'm in the Shriners, the Mason, and several different fraternities. And they did another article on me a few weeks ago. I became a certified practition. First one in the area, black or white. So I tell a family, "When you call me, you're being certified by a certified practition."

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[1] Scans of the paper items provided by Mr. Brown are included among this interview's associated files.

[00:45:00] So now, that tells you some of the things that make a difference. You can keep that.

SB: Oh great, thank you. Yeah. What was the process for that certification?

DB: Ah, you have to have about 80, 90 hours in a year. A whole lot of education. (Laughs)

SB: I'll say, wow.

DB: But education is what I get off on. Yeah. Tomorrow we're doing a seminar. I'm in charge of a seminar. We're doing a six-, five-hour seminar in Greenville. We do it every year.

SB: Who is that?

DB: That's the Eastern District, Funeral Directors. But we have people come from all over the state. Come from out of state just to get our continuing education. Now, some people wait for us every year, because we have a very (?) seminar.

SB: Do you like teaching, is that something you enjoy?

DB: My goal is when I turn 55, is to lease this funeral home to whoever wants it, and they pay me $5,000 a month. And then I'm going to enjoy— Yeah, I like going around speaking.

SB: Well, what have we not addressed that you'd like to address, or what have I not asked you that I should have asked? Other things that you'd like to include in this?

DB: The only other thing that I'd include in this is that we need to educate students that are coming through funeral service how to— I guess the theory, maybe when me and you was coming up, Mama taught us how to walk into somebody office, how to look, how to be (equity?). We need to teach students coming into the funeral profession how to go and present. And that's something I was telling the school. "You need to teach these kids how to present themselves." Instead of walking in there, "Are you hiring? Are y'all hiring?" That's not how you do it. How you do it is you come in, you introduce yourself, you look him in the eye, you say, "I'm Don Brown. First of all, I was in the community, I was stopping by, and I observed that you have a funeral home here. I'm in the funeral profession and I was just concerned, just stopping by in the community. I just finished Fayetteville Tech Community College and I'm looking for somewhere to do my internship. Do you mind if I come in?" Come in, stand up until you're asked to be seated. But you've got to learn. These are the kinds of things I'd like to see in the future. The theory of what's done today is going to vanish away. Did I answer your question?

SB: Very much.

DB: Okay.

SB: Thank you so much. This teaches me a lot, and answers so many questions that I had. I really appreciate your time.

DB: No problem. I'm going to give you a copy of this.

[Recording ends at 47:50]